

Message Text

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FM AMCONSUL SYDNEY

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6730

INFO AMEMBASSY CANBERRA IMMEDIATE

AMCONSUL MELBOURNE

AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON

AMCONSUL PERTH

AMCONSUL BRISBANE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SYDNEY 0124

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, AS

SUBJ: WILLIS OVERTHROWS LEWIS AS NEW SOUTH WALES PREMIER

REFS: (A) 75 SYDNEY 2600, (B) 75 SYDNEY 2551

1. RADIO HAS JUST ANNOUNCED THAT IN STATE LIBERAL PARTY CAUCUS MEETING THIS AFTERNOON PREMIER LEWIS WAS VOTED OUT AS PARTY LEADER AND WAS REPLACED BY MINISTER OF EDUCATION SIR ERIC WILLIS, WHO AUTOMATICALLY BECOMES PREMIER OF THE LIBERAL/COUNTRY PARTY COALITION GOVERNMENT. DEPUTY LIBERAL PARTY LEADER AND ATTORNEY GENERAL MADDISON RETAINS HIS POSITION.

2. THIS RATHER DRAMATIC AND SUDDEN TURNOVER IS IN FACT A REALIZATION OF INCREASING DISSATISFACTION IN THE LIBERAL PARTY WITH LEWIS' PERFORMANCE. ALTHOUGH IN SUBSTANCE THIS EVENT WAS FORESHADOWED IN MANY QUARTERS YET THE TIMING AND SUDDENNESS ARE STARTLING AND MAY HAVE BEEN PARTLY PRECIPITATED BY THE LIBERAL/COUNTRY PARTY COALITION'S STUNNING FEDERAL
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VICTORY LAST MONTH. AN ELECTION IS REQUIRED IN NEW

SOUTH WALES NOT LATER THAN THE END OF NOVEMBER THIS YEAR AND, AS HAS BEEN PREVIOUSLY REPORTED, THERE HAS BEEN MUCH CONCERN ON THE PART OF LIBERAL PARTY LEADERS HERE AS TO WHETHER UNDER LEWIS THE COALITION COULD HANG ON. PRIOR TO DECEMBER THE GENERAL VIEW WAS THAT THE STATE GOVERNMENT COULD HANG ON BY EXPLOITING LABOR'S FEDERAL DISARRAY AND BY WAITING FOR AN ANTICIPATED ECONOMIC IMPROVEMENT THIS YEAR. TODAY, HOWEVER, WITH A LIBERAL/COUNTRY PARTY REGIME IN OFFICE IN CANBERRA THE LEWIS GOVERNMENT IN NEW SOUTH WALES MUST RUN ON ITS RECORD WHICH IS NOT OUTSTANDING. WHEREAS PREVIOUSLY THE ACCEPTED WISDOM HAD BEEN FOR THE COALITION TO STICK WITH LEWIS UNTIL AFTER AN ELECTION IN ORDER TO AVOID GIVING AN IMPRESSION OF INSTABILITY, UNDER THE NEW CIRCUMSTANCES IT WAS APPARENTLY DECIDED TO MAKE THE CHANGE QUICKLY IN THE HOPE OF REBUILDING THE PARTY'S FORTUNES UNDER WILLIS AND IN THE AFTERGLOW OF THE COALITION'S FEDERAL VICTORY.

3. TODAY'S ACTION GOES A LONG WAY TOWARD ANSWERING THE QUESTION RAISED IN PARA 5 OF REF A, NAMELY HOW WOULD THE COALITION FEDERAL VICTORY AFFECT THE COALITION GOVERNMENT OF NEW SOUTH WALES? AS INDICATED IN REF B THE WAGGA BY-ELECTION WAS AN UNHAPPY OMEN FOR THE STATE'S COALITION GOVERNMENT. APPARENTLY IN THE WAKE OF THIS DISAPPOINTING PERFORMANCE IN WAGGA THE STATE PARTY LEADERS HAVE DECIDED THAT THE LEWIS GOVERNMENT WAS ON A DOWNSWING AND THAT THERE WAS NOTHING TO LOSE AND PERHAPS MUCH TO GAIN BY MAKING THE CHANGE NOW. APART FROM THAT, THE PRINCIPAL RESULT WILL BE A STEADIER HAND IN THE HELM. WHEREAS LEWIS' WEAKNESS WAS A TENDENCY TO SHOOT FROM THE HIP AND TO ACT WITHOUT CONSULTING HIS COLLEAGUES, WILLIS IS A HIGHLY COMPETENT BUREAUCRAT AS WELL AS POLITICIAN, RESPECTED IN LABOR PARTY QUARTERS AND LABOR UNION RANKS AS WELL AS IN HIS OWN PARTY.
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